

CRANBERRIES

*Roots run deep for
Duxbury cranberry bog owner*

Fruits of their labor



*Stanley Merry has been harvesting
cranberries in Duxbury since 1964.*

Staff photo Doug McFadd

Lesley Mahoney

STAFF WRITER

Like the leaves on trees, cranberry bogs go through their own sort of metamorphosis this time of year. Their changing colors serve as tell-tale signs of the autumn harvest.

On Temple Street in Duxbury, men load trucks up with ripe crimson cranberries from one of Stanley H. Merry's 13 bogs in town.

The truck takes in the cranberries, separating the twigs and leaves from the fruit.

It's the season for cranberry harvesting which begins in mid-September and ends in early November. And cranberry growers for Merry's business - Merryland Cranberries - are as busy as ever.

Evolution of a business

Merry, 82, who bought his first cranberry bog for \$6,500 in 1964 - 2.5 acres near North Hill Golf Course - says he has just started to reap the benefits in the last decade.

"I hawked my shirt to do it... I had to work very hard to pay taxes on the land," said Merry, whose bogs in town range from 2 to 10 acres.

Merry, who bought his bogs from about five families, said he made the investment as a means of staying in Duxbury.

"I was born on Washington Street. My roots are very deep here," he said. "I wanted to stay in Duxbury but I couldn't make a decent living here."

So, he bought up the bogs as a means of providing for himself and his family after retirement because he knew there was no chance of getting a pension. After working at Bethlehem Steel Co. in Quincy for 29 years, Merry said he was eligible for \$121 in social security.

So, he planned ahead and bought some land in the region he deems "the best place in the world to grow cranberries." From Duxbury to Carver to Cape Cod and extending out to Easton, Merry says the climate is ideal for growing the fruit. Proximity to the ocean mitigates frosts and the

region's sand which cranberries thrive on is beneficial.

The area, he says, offers a "very benign climate for cranberries."

Merry explained the first cultivation of cranberries came to be by accident in the 19th century when a man by the name of Henry Hall from Cape Cod realized sand that had blown onto his wild cranberry crops sparked their growth more than ever.

Cranberries also flourish in Wisconsin, New Jersey, Washington, and Oregon grow the fruit. To a lesser degree, the states of Maine and Michigan cultivate cranberries.

From the time he bought his first bog, Merry's work experience charted a long and varied path one that leaves him with a three page resume. From Bethlehem Steel to General Dynamics to J.E. Bowker Associates, Merry worked as an

engineer. Among his varied roles, he also worked in Pascagoula, Mississippi as a project engineer and lead analyst working with Navy Counsel, and prepared plans and specifications for the conversion from steam to diesel on the R.V. Atlantis II for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

But all the time he was working, Merry returned to Duxbury to work on his bogs.

It wasn't always a lucrative business, however.

What Merry refers to as the "cranberry depression" that hit after World War II. For at least 20 years, he said people did not care for the sour fruit. Merry watched the prices he brought in for his crops fall from \$36 to \$8 per barrel in three years.

But citing a massive advertising campaign by Ocean Spray as one reason, Merry said the berries eventually made a comeback. Now, cranberries are known for their health benefits, including aiding in treatment for urinary tract problems. More than 100 years ago, the fruit was used to treat scurvy.

While gone are the days when 600 acres of cranberry bogs were cultivated in Duxbury - Merry surmises that number is more like 200 acres now - gone also are the days when cranberry growers toiled by hand and with oxen.

"When I was a kid, I'd see 35 to 50 people in the bogs with scoops," he said.

Years later, Merry is grateful he stuck to his investment.

During the "cranberry depression," he recalls his wife saying, "Why don't you give up like everyone else?"

But Merry told her, "I can't give up. I have too much in it."

Ultimately, he said the bogs have helped pay tuition for his sons, Alan Standish Merry and William Neal Merry. Merry said he has asked his sons to take over the operations next fall.

"I'm getting ancient," he laughed.

It's always a busy season

While cranberry growers may be busy all the time of year, Merry assures that picking is a year-round one.

"Everyone thinks when they see the cranberry crop in the fall here, the growers come and pick the cranberries and do nothing the rest of the year," Merry said.

At the Cedar Crest bogs by his Temple Street home where he lives with his wife and black Labrador retriever Tasha, the growers are hard at work.

Merry points to the cranberries floating on the bog - next in line to be drawn in by the wooden beams and pumped into the loader.

"Cranberries are buoyant, like little balloons on the water," he said.

Before the cranberries are loaded onto the trucks for delivery to Ocean Spray in Carver, the growers use a beater to agitate the berries and loosen them from the vines.

Before that, the bogs are flooded so the cranberries will float.

At the very beginning of the harvest season, Merry said his workers prepare for picking by making sure all of the equipment is in good condition.

When the harvest season comes to an end in November, Merry said his growers take a brief vacation. But before long, they are back to work again - providing for a successful crop the following season.

Merry said the irrigation system is instrumental to mitigate any frosts that come along.

"Last spring, we had 34 frosts. We have to make sure the pumps are running," he said.

Ultimately, Merry said this year's crop was double last year.

But he said cranberry harvests fluctuate from year to year. And the plentiful harvest this year is possible despite the lack of rain since August, Merry said - explaining all cranberry bogs have reservoirs to provide for that type of situation.

At the end of the season and preparing for a sort of second retirement, Merry still gets excited by cranberries three decades deep in the business.

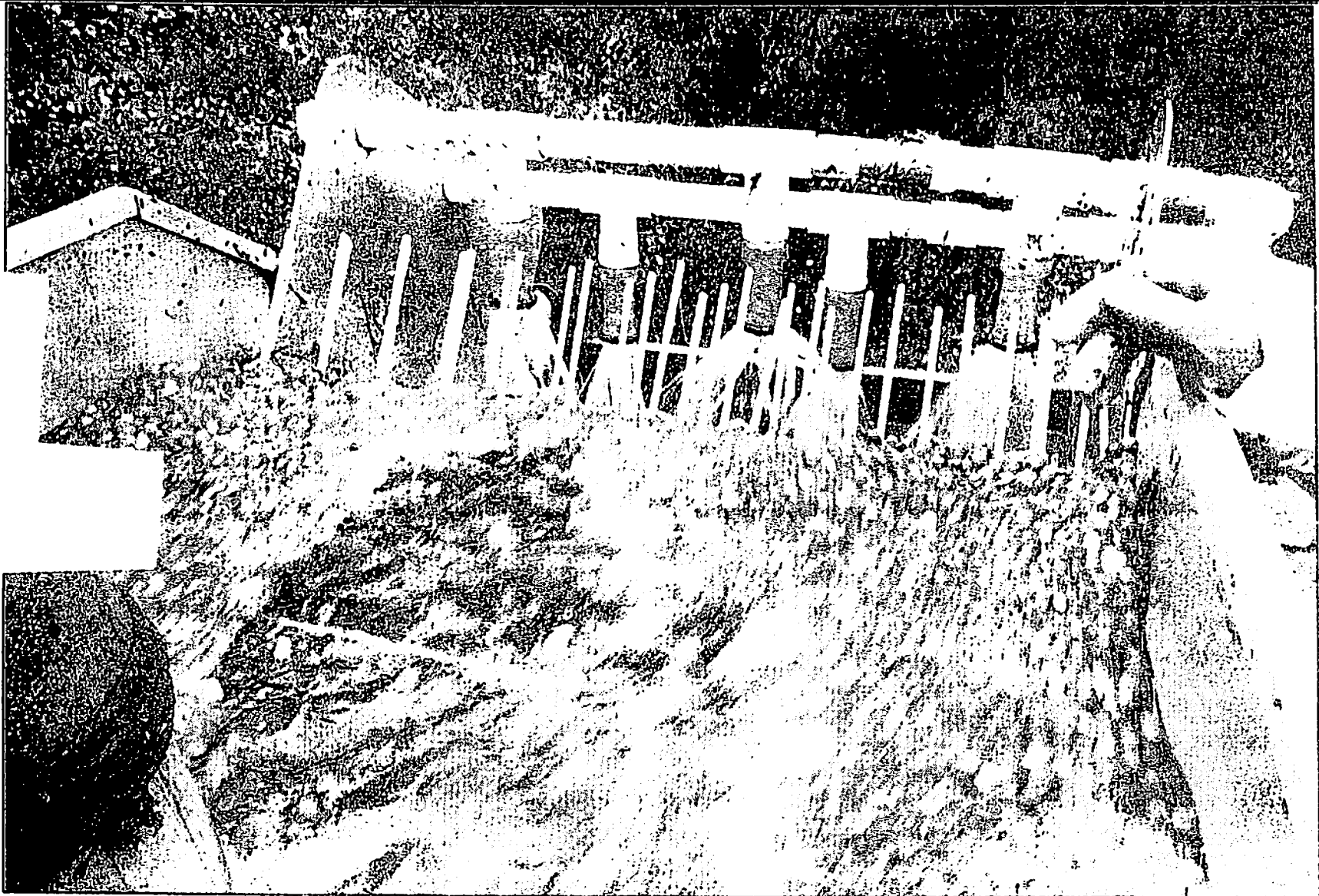
"I absolutely love to see the plants grow," he said.

And he hasn't tired of the taste.

"I like cranberries. I eat a handful now and then," Merry said.

Cranberries

2/2



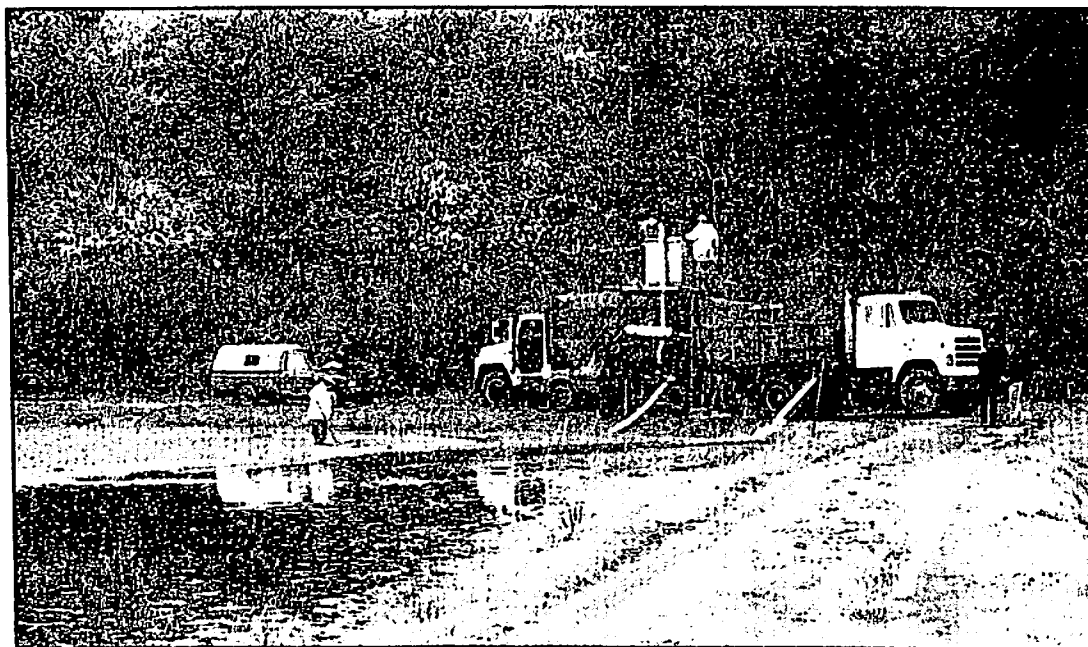
Cranberries are washed as they make their way through the process at Merry's bog on Temple Street.

Staff photo/Pam McLeod



Gary Thorp works knee deep in cranberries on a bog owned by Stanley Merry on Tremont Street.

Staff photo: Doug McFadden



Workers harvest cranberries on Temple Street Monday.